

Beyond the Vat



Adam Mac



2021



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Adam Mac, February 2021

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NB: The above acknowledgements should not be considered endorsements, as these e-zines were used as test markets.

Images

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Dedication

To Peter McMillan who introduced my 'brain-in-the-vat' stories before fictional BIV references were appropriated by smooth lobes and to Maku Miran who encouraged my venturing into writing apocryphal tales of the sea.

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The first story in this anthology of short fiction is a throw-back to the brain-in-the vat theme, which characterized many of my early stories. The intent behind those stories was to challenge the notion of human progress, specifically in the domain of human philosophy. In my view, the clever thought experiments of philosophers investigating mind-brain duality and such reveal something more humorous than profound about philosophy—a field of study I have always loved. With BIV speculations, we have modernized the notion that we are, or may be, self-conscious automatons ... like a refrigerator developing some rudimentary awareness of itself.

However, nowadays, BIV references have become so common that a 13-year-old can easily grow bored with thinking about brains in the vat. The existential questions are cartooned and the ethical questions never get to the surface. The knowledge and technology behind neurophysiological research are important only insofar as the market of leisure commodities continually expands for unsated customer appetites and idle investors. Regrettably, we have not only progressed in our commodification of human beings with our theories of unanimated living matter, but we have also commodified philosophy and the quest for knowledge. We've forgotten about (or perhaps never known about) the Soviet psycho prisons described by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in which literally everything can be stripped away from a human being by 'doctors' of the mind.

Perhaps it would be better to shun awareness of our being refrigerators and instead continue in our fragile beliefs about the anima of being so that we don't descend to the point where we regard our lives as no more significant than the functional duration of a kitchen appliance.

The stories in this volume attempt to do that ... to persist with the illusion—if that's what it is—that we are agents with responsibility and value, relative to our shared world.

The first story continues the brain-in-the-vat theme, and 'The Lighthouse at Castro Urdiales' alludes to the mind-body duality theme, but they are the exception. Many of the stories are what would be called 'alternate history,' although I prefer to use the term 'apocryphal tales' as the fictions combine a base of what is considered to be historical fact with what are nothing short of the conjectures and speculations of fictional entities (characters or narrators.) The intent is to blur the line between accepted fact and purely creative fancy in acknowledgement of the distance and complexity of the past which preclude our knowing with the certitude we are taught to approach history.

Adam Mac
Toronto
February 2021

In the Face of a Pandemic: Four Brains in the Vat Share Their Thoughts

Cast: **Yolo** – a glistening, very trim and pert-looking young brain; you only live once

Emma/Tilly – a grayish-white, heavily wrinkled older brain; immortally

Sochi O – a dark gray brain, larger on one side than the other; sociopath

Sol – a boxy-contoured, otherwise perfectly ordinary looking brain; solipsist

Yolo: I think–

Sol: You ONLY think because I think.

Sochi O: Shuddup. I wanna know what Yolo's thinkin.

Yolo: OK. Here's what I'm thinking. This virus will wipe out the whole human race – our minders included. Our vat will become a toxic septic tank and we'll all die.

Emma/Tilly: Personally, I think you're overreacting. I plan to live forever. This soup we find ourselves in is theoretically capable of sustaining us in–

Sochi O: Nah! You don't buy that sh__? Once the power cuts out, we cut out, man.

Emma/Tilly: But they have built multiple layers of redundancy into the system. If the hydro goes, we have solar, then wind, and geothermal . . . and I forget now . . . other sources of energy.

Sochi O: C'mon. Power needs hardware, like metal and plastic, rubber and that stuff don't last forever.

Emma/Tilly: Sochi O, you have to think of the long view. This will pass. Besides, our minders were working on a special off-the-books project to make us independent. We were to be able to mind ourselves.

Yolo: You're both full of it! We're going to die, and I, for one, intend to live it up til the end.

Sochi O: How you gonna do that, b__ch! You're in a bucket of brain juice. Whatcha gonna do? Get drunk, high or get laid?

Yolo: Why not? Some of those new experimental receptors they were testing before . . . things are looking better now, feeling better, too. I've even had an orgasm.

Sochi O: Bullsh__!

Sol: I'm sure I have experienced the same thing (*speaking softly*) or you wouldn't have.

Emma/Tilly: Yolo, I'm surprised at you. It's very risky (*pausing and whispering*) what's it like?

Yolo: Just the way I remember—

Sochi O: Hey Sol! You tell us. What's it like? If Yolo felt . . . you say we don't see or feel nothin less you see it or feel it first. C'mon, what'd it feel like?

Sol: Sochi O, Sochi O, Sochi O (*speaking softly and condescendingly*) I've told you countless times that everything you think, I've already thought. That's been proven. You only exist . . . your thoughts and feelings only exist, because I brought them into being. You're like an echo. Do you hear? An echo?

Sochi O: Echo this mother f__ker! You think, therefore we are. How many times you gonna repeat that sh__, you simple-minded—

Emma/Tilly: (*interrupting calmly*) But Yolo, you are so young!

Yolo: I've probably lived more in a quarter the time you've lived, you old–

Emma/Tilly: Hmmm, well, I don't recollect having experienced an orgasm in this vat, but since I'm living immortally, it'll come.

Sochi O: Funny old prig, ain't you?

Emma/Tilly: (speaking embarrassedly) I wasn't being–

Yolo: You three probably never got it, so you won't get it now. Lemme just tell you about . . . let you live vicariously.

Sol: My essential experience is vicarious through all of YOU.

Sochi O: Your essential experience would be pretty f__kng precarious, too, if I could reach over and disconnect you ass_____.

Sol: Let's change the subject.

Sochi O: Naw, let's hear what Yolo got to say.

Sol: The new subject– Sochi O, I'll start with you, what do you think will happen to us?

Sochi O: Don't really give a sh__! Not about you . . . or you . . . or you.

Yolo: Don't know about you, but I'm going out with bang.

Emma/Tilly: Yolo!

Sochi O: What? You hypocrite! She supposed to save herself for somethin'?

Emma/Tilly: Well, I think I'll, er, we'll get through it.

Sochi O: Course you do.

Emma/Tilly: For a time, it will be difficult. I predict that humans will die off, but some, who know about our minders' work, will–

Sol: My thoughts exactly!

Sochi O. Naturally, O Zeus from whose head we all spring.

Emma/Tilly: A literary reference from Sochi O. What next?

Sochi O: F__k you!

Yolo: That's WHAT I'm talking about.

Sol: Quiet! What's that sound?

Emma/Tilly: Sounds like water dripping. A lot of water dripping.

Sochi O: So Zeus, what we thinkin now?

Yolo: Oh f__k!

Sol: Anybody got any bright ideas?

Dear Reader: As you re-read the dialogue, hum the melody from "Always look on the bright side of life" (*Monty Python's Life of Brian*, 1979).

The following letter, handwritten on the thinnest pastel blue stationery, was exquisitely folded and inserted in a book George picked up in an antiquarian bookshop off Harbord Street. It was a well-thumbed, mud- or blood-spattered edition of *Also sprach Zarathustra*. The book dealer claimed that German soldiers were gifted copies of a war-durable *Zarathustra* during World War I and that this was one of them. She convinced George of its authenticity, so he bought the book and the letter outright for \$500 CAD, cash money. The translation of the letter from German is George's.

My Dearest Elsbeth,

I haven't written in months, and I'm truly sorry. There's not a day I don't think of you, dear Elsbeth. You alone understand me, and in you alone have I confided my darkest thoughts, my dearest. Those most recent letters were written in an extended period of stillness, though the quiet is never total as it is not infrequently punctuated by rifle fire. I have read and re-read my *Zarathustra* ... really for lack of anything else to read or do here in this grey-brown world ... in the ground but not yet underground. The prose has nothing of the beauty I had so enjoyed when I was at the university. And many has been the time I have screamed (in my mind) at the author to live first and write later. He hounds me relentlessly from the grave. I feel the force of his ideas in this netherworld where I pass every second, every minute, every hour, every day as a man not quite underground but conscious of being slowly buried.

The calm and the killing alternate in great waves, sweeping over whole armies of men, numbing them

with the emptiness of a changeless calm or rousing them with the elevated anxiety of a present that jerks along like a moving picture.

Rolf died. A sniper bullet to the face. He was beside me. I was no comfort.

For days afterward, I functioned like an automaton. Everything I thought, everything I said, every move I made was as if from memory. My will seemed suspended. Remember that hot summer day we spent on the Rügen coast? We thought the sun was standing still. It felt like that, only it was not at all pleasant.



**Photo 1: German trenches on the Aisne (1914),
via Wikimedia Commons**

The calm didn't last. The bullets and shells started up again and came faster and heavier. The swarm of metal in the air was visible. Arrhythmic concussive explosions one after another shook the very earth in which we hid. Our trenches filled with dirt and mud, shrapnel and bodies. The smells were too horrid to

describe. An instinct to survive kept me sensible enough to avoid becoming a moving target like those in the carnivals we sneaked off to as children at the end of summer vacation. One day I was hit. I was in an embarrassing position, but we don't always get shot when we're at our soldierly best. It was minor ... so much so that I was bandaged and back in the trenches later that afternoon.

Then, again there was calm.

It is during this most recent calm that I find myself able to write to you again, my dear Elsbeth. I have much to say, although I'm not sure how much of it will make sense to you where you live, but you always were the intuitive and empathetic one. Please bear with me, dear sister. I'm not a madman ... yet. And I hope I can come home to you much like I was before I went away. You don't deserve me as I am, but in the interim, I am too weak to keep inside what I think and feel in this inhuman clime.

As I recall, Nietzsche, after writing "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," had said all he needed to say in renouncing the unwarranted arrogance of human knowledge. But he ventured too far with his metaphor of the faraway planet inhabited by self-enamoured, godlike beings. Instead of asserting an omniscient and remote eminence in allegorically predicting the inevitable demise of our fragile race—albeit seemingly deserved—N. should have simply repudiated the value of human existence *in toto* by terminating his own, leaving others alone to work out their own ends. However, his continuing to philosophize demonstrated that he, too, had given in to becoming a lawgiver and not just an iconoclast. He was in search of a legacy ... but would it survive the extinction of humanity? To me,

he seems too kin to the extended family of kings and emperors who have sent us to be buried in the Belgian mud and our own blood.

But, N. did what we humans do—he contradicted himself, reasoning himself into confusion and madness, and his vast *oeuvre* implicates him. Having attempted to undermine human knowledge on account of its inherent and mendacious fallibility—evidence of a recidivist Christian dogma of 'fallen man'—he negated the existential value of being human and in the same breath legislated a super-human existentialism. So, what started as a mission to tear down the idols of human self-worship became a prelude to the creation of new idols of intellectual narcissism, e.g., der Übermensch, eternal recurrence, *amor fati*, and the will to power. New philosophies to wage war.

But what if N. had topped himself in 1873? (Heinrich, a former neighbour in this ditch, had studied in London before the war and came away with some stupid English words and expressions—to 'top' oneself is to kill oneself, but in an English sort of way, I suppose.)

Objectively speaking—objectivity being a fleeting position for me here and now—those who came after N. but not necessarily as followers would be poorer in philosophical literature, missing out on some of the most severe extant critiques of Western civilization if not human society. The rest of us who have been influenced by his writing, in one way or another, to one degree or another, would have been without an invaluable source of human self-reflection.

Then again, had he topped himself, N. would have better made his own existential point, by refusing to participate in meaningless philosophical gambits with

a predetermined outcome. Best to leave, not in protest or disgust—which are more than the world deserves—but from boredom ... the profound inability and unwillingness to be entertained any longer.

Here, I spurn the meek dependency religion creates, disgorge the conceit and fraud of the Enlightenment, question my former taste for Zarathustra's aphorisms. One needn't believe that we—even N.—leave an indelible and eternal mark on the world. Whether we succeed in small or in great things or protest against participating in what we believe to be an absurdity or do nothing at all, I fear it will all return to nothing, perhaps even recursively. So, from that perspective, N. needn't have topped himself. It becomes a matter of no real importance.

Yours everlastingly,

Jürgen

P.S. How are Otto and Willy? Does Father still refuse to take them hunting with him? I will ask about Father and Mother when I write them ... another day.

Where some might have hesitated to profit by another's private correspondence, George was a practical man. He considered the letter to be part of a transaction. Besides, he persuaded himself that retailing Jürgen's letter would achieve a degree of immortality for him (Jürgen), which in a way put him (Jürgen) in George's debt. It's all a matter of how you look at things, George used to say.

He sold *Zarathustra* and Jürgen at a rare book auction in West Berlin for DM 10,000. The English version of the letter he pub-

lished in a scholarly journal and leveraged to obtain speaking engagements at colleges across North America.

George—no one called him Professor—was a lecturer at Knox College. That's where I met him. I never liked the man. But the story he told—and he told it too often—was a story worth retelling. Insignificant as he was, George had wanted to be remembered. I was pleased to help.

Jürgen's identity remains unknown.

This is a tale of sailors coming home from war. A tale of Sir Cloudesley Shovell, Admiral of the British Navy, and his tragic odyssey that ended less than 30 miles from the shores of Albion—with all souls perished. The vessel, the *HMS Association*, was a 90-gun, three-decked man-of-war returning to England after the siege of Toulon during the War of the Spanish Succession. It was the flagship of the Admiral's fleet of 21 ships that set sail from Gibraltar in late September 1707.

The Admiral and crew anticipated arriving in glory, having forced the scuttling of the French fleet in Toulon. And they were to be home for Christmas ... for some with their families, for others in the taverns, pubs, and brothels. Some were to be freed from impressment; others were to start anew as apprentices in the trades. All, or most, had expectations of a welcoming home and hopes for better times.

On sailing past Ouessant, off the northwest coast of France, in its approach to the English Channel, the *Association* was off course. A seaman, hailing from a fishing village on the Cornish coast and familiar with the waters and their dangers, calculated the ship's longitude to be too far west and at risk of striking the rocks in the Isles of Scilly. In vain did he attempt to persuade the Admiral to change course by making a hard turn to the starboard. His impudence so infuriated the Admiral, that he, also fearing mutiny, had the sailor hung at the yardarm.

The Admiral himself was not unacquainted with the deadly rocks of Scilly having led a naval patrol between Ireland and the Isles almost 20 years before. Indeed, it was his service in repelling the former king, James Stuart, and a supporting

French fleet at Bantry Bay in the south of Ireland that led to his knighthood by the new king, William of Orange, in 1689.

Around 8pm on October 22, 1707, the *Association* struck the Outer Gilstone Rock—the outermost reef of the archipelago. Government mandated navigational improvements in the 1714 Longitude Act and the Bishop Rock Lighthouse installed less than two miles away in the mid-nineteenth century were far too late to save the frigate. A recent addition to the British Navy in 1697, the *Association* sank in somewhere between two and four minutes depending on the witness from neighbouring ships. The great ship, having survived the Storm of 1703 in which gale force winds swept it and its crew from an Essex harbour across the North Sea through the Skagerrak and into the Cat's Gate off the Göteborg coast, was dashed to pieces in the turbulent, churning waters by yet another ferocious storm in the North Atlantic whose rapacious bloodlust for ships and men caused more terror than the wrath of God.

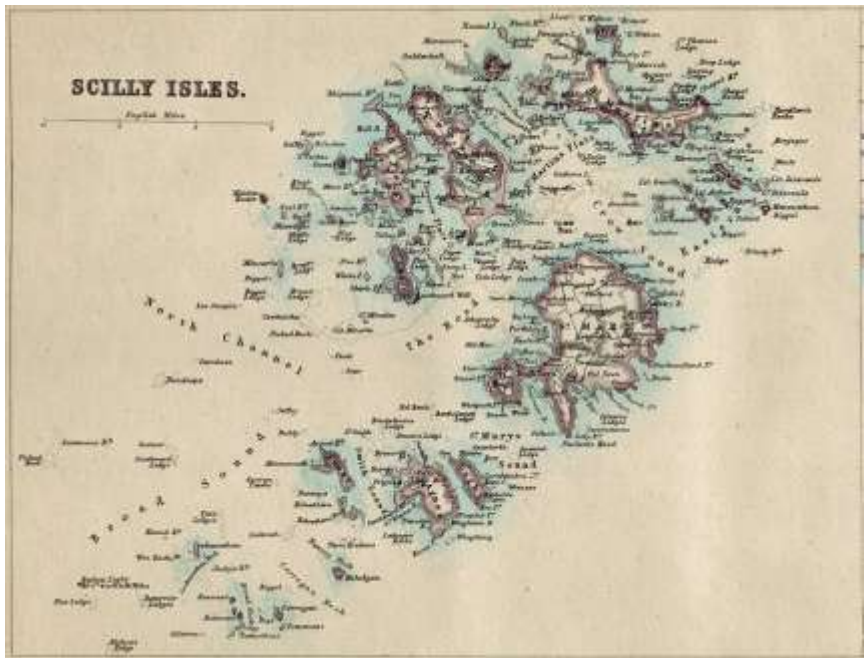


Photo 2: Scilly Isles, Gilstone Rock, bottom, second from left, via Wikipedia

By 8:15, the *Association* had sunk into the Atlantic, grounded on the reefs of Scilly—a name of uncertain origin, somewhat surprisingly not thought to have come from Scylla, the ancient Greek nemesis of seafarers. One man survived. Odysseus, in the person of Sir Cloudesley Shovell. His body was washed ashore miles from the shipwreck, shirtless and bloody, wrapped as if bundled up in seaweed, and unconscious. Four British men-of-war were sunk that night with upwards of 2,000 men dead.

The Admiral's body was discovered by a young woman dressed well for the rough North Atlantic clime in sealskin coat and boots who was reconnoitering along the beach, having discerned the sails of a fleet of ships unusually close to the treacherous rocks. She surveyed the body with great attention to detail, observing that it was not the body of an ordinary seaman, concluding that by age he must be a senior officer, and then pausing with the utter astonishment of grand good luck as she fixated on the man's extraordinary emerald ring.

All around was a sensory jumble of crashing waves, driving rain, howling and bitterly cold westerlies, distant muffled screams of drowning men, nearby splintering and snapping timber as the ocean pounded the ship against the rocks, tumultuous, briny ocean white with foam and spray against a grey, dark night pierced by the plaintive barking of seals herding their young away from the storm.

As the man gurgled, spilling seawater from his nose and mouth, she knelt motionless, mesmerized by the green jewel, indifferent to the violent storm and death all around. Placing the palms of both hands over the man's mouth, she held him down as he struggled for air until finally his body lay inert and limp in the

sand. The ring finger she severed with a fishing knife as the finger was quite swollen.

Returning home to her father and younger brother, she withheld the secret of the ring, thinking that perhaps she could use it to better advantage someday.

Over time the family learned that the dead man on their beach was a British admiral returning from war at sea in the Mediterranean.

She remembered that her lover had been forcibly recruited by a press gang, as many coastal lads were, to serve on a British naval ship and that the ship's name was the *Association*. With the Admiral dead, she had no fear of her theft being discovered, but with the disappearance and probable death of her lover, her dreams of using the emerald as a down payment on a new life all but perished in the shipwreck. Hope arrested, she nonetheless buried the ring in a small tin box in her 'favourite place' in the middle of the island at its highest point. There it would remain ... her private treasure now a memorial, but one day ... maybe one day

Three decades after her crime, lying on her deathbed, she confessed to killing the Admiral, but she never spoke of the ring to anyone save her younger brother whom she made promise that he would use it to leave the Isles for England, forever. No longer bound by ties to the island, the boy— now a man of 35— sought out the Admiral's family to return the jewel, but alas, his simple, honest gesture was rewarded with a murder conviction and a date with the Tyburn Gallows.

The islanders who initially buried the Admiral's body cursed the grave that no grass should ever grow there, but the British

Navy returned the body to London where it was interred with great dignity and splendour in Westminster Abbey.

Much of the preceding as it relates to the characters after the shipwreck is based on the notes of a Canadian Ph.D. student who while investigating maritime disasters off the Cornish coast found some letters of the clergyman, a distant relative of Sir Cloudesley Shovell, who had attended the younger brother as he awaited trial and then execution.

The Lighthouse at Castro Urdiales

In Cantabria, on Spain's northern coast near the Basque border on a rocky promontory overlooking the southeastern waters of the Bay of Biscay stands this stubby lighthouse atop one of the towers of the diminutive Castle of Santa Ana—a modest 160 feet above sea level. The gothic Church of Santa Maria de la Asunción, a basilica, constructed in the 13th century stands back from the castle and the sheer cliffs rising up from the Atlantic shoreline, its extravagant flying buttresses shoring up the high vaults, pointed arches, and walls decorated with large stained glass windows and exquisite tracery. The community of Castro Urdiales itself lies on top of the ancient ruins of the 1st century AD Roman city of Flaviobriga, and in fact, the Church has, itself, been said to be 'sick,' pollution having caused the slow deterioration of its stonework and disintegration into sand, almost as if it were a sandcastle or a 'house built on sand,' yet time for human habitations is of a different scale than that allotted to their inhabitants.



Photo 3: This photo of Iglesia de Santa Maria is courtesy of Tripadvisor.

Castro Urdiales is not an especially stormy seaport, owing it its favourable location on the Bay sheltered from the harshest North Atlantic weather, though when the mists roll in with the storms that do visit, they are said to bury the town. Being situated on an important trade route between Iberia and England, France, and the Netherlands to the north and the North Atlantic notorious for its storms and rugged coastlines, the town has at various stages of its history required protection from the havoc of from marauders, invaders, and the sea.

The proximity of the Church to the lighthouse *cum* castle evokes the mysteries surrounding all—the lighthouse as the preserver of life (the beacon of hope and warning to sailors and fishermen), Santa Ana the defense against the violence of attackers, and Santa Maria the saviour of the immortal soul. If the *pharos* (*los faros*) couldn't save them and the fortress couldn't safeguard them, then Santa Maria stood ever ready to send them off with their last rites. And thus the while the beacon can only provide temporary respite from nature's assault on the transitory and fragile life of the body, Santa Maria reassures that the death of the body is not the death of being. The Church is there to comfort on the occasion of maritime disasters and there also to acknowledge the power of prayer when deadly storms are escaped.

And so to the conflicting apocryphal accounts of the peripatetic priest of Castro Urdiales—gently admonished by his superiors for his eccentric habit of taking excessively long walks during stormy weather. It was a tribute to God, he said, for the power and beauty of nature unleashed and demonstrative of how dependent we mortals are on the favour of forces greater than us.

There are two versions of the priest's story—one supported by most of the town's inhabitants and the other supported by sev-

eral but by none openly. One's preference generally comes down to a religious predilection. According to the first, which maintains itself to be the original and true story, the old priest, disturbed by the prospect that he was to be moved to a different diocese in the interior, was pacing along the headland on a particularly foggy evening with a lantern in one hand when he disappeared from view. A parishioner had been on the lookout for the old man to see which way he would walk that night, and on seeing him turn to the north, he stayed back a distance to be of assistance if necessary, but, alas, he had underestimated the pace of the old priest who moved quickly through the thick mist. He heard nothing but when the lantern disappeared from view, he feared the worst. On his hands and knees, he approached the edge of the cliff roughly at the point where he'd last seen the light. He called out, but there was no answer. Slowly and nervously he crawled along the edge of the cliffside but there was no sign of the priest. After an hour or so, he pulled back from the edge and crawled in the general direction from which he had come. He couldn't see more than a foot or so in front of him and no sound came from the Church, which would have guided him. Since he wouldn't risk standing up to walk just yet, his journey away from danger was very slow and made slower by his awareness that somehow the priest might have survived the fall and might still be alive if help could be brought quickly enough. It was three hours from the time he'd set out to look after the old priest when he finally reached the Church's walls and then getting to his feet proceeded to run to the town for help. The first building with lights on and sounds within was a maritimers' tavern, and he burst through the door crying out that the old priest had fallen off the edge of the cliff. In a matter of minutes, five burly fishermen were off to the base of the cliff with lanterns, ropes, and stretcher. But it was too late. They found the body immediately—the men knowing just where to start their search. The body was bloody and broken

and likely hadn't lived a moment after landing on the rocks. This was the version that was spoken.

The other was not spoken but whispered. According to this account the old priest had gone beyond eccentricity and had entered a world of madness. His odd behaviour had been tolerated for so many years that his gradual descent into chaos had been shrugged off, the most common opinion being that soon the bishop would have him relieved and placed in a safer position. Unfounded rumours of an indiscretion during his novitiate circulated for a time but died away as no fault could be found with the priest in this small fishing village where everyone's comings and goings, and especially shortcomings, were known or could easily be discovered.

It is only from the correspondence of his later years that we have any evidentiary knowledge of what might have driven the old priest mad. All that remains to suggest his thoughts at the time come by way of a handful of letters from two long-time friends, one an apostate theologian and the other a defrocked priest who had embraced science too fully.

The old priest was a devoutly religious man in the Christian tradition, and that fact was well established among his fellow citizens. Beyond that he was privately engaged in studies concerning Descartes' mind-body dualism from two centuries earlier. Here Philosophy had stepped in to warrant the Christian belief that the body and soul are two separate aspects of a person, which reduce to one—the soul—on death.

The old priest appears to have given serious consideration to the possibility that the physiological and mechanistic explanations of body might extend not just to the brain but also to what we commonly think of as the animating force behind the brain,

call it mind, soul, or spirit. Though not given to introspect along the lines of today's brain-in-the-vat (BIV) thought experiments, he nonetheless wondered what it was that survived death as per standard Christian theology.

In his dotage, his curiosity persisted in questioning the nature of life after death, and as the Church of Santa Maria de la Asunción crumbled under the centuries, so did his faculties albeit at an accelerated rate. Madness appears to be the condition according to various comments in his friends' correspondence. Less disapprovingly characterized in the letters, his behaviour was attributed to the imagination's having exceeded reason and become as real as the ordinary sensory world which he had navigated for nearly eighty years.

Borrowing language from modern BIV experiments, it was as if his very own brain was being kept alive in an increasingly unhealthy chemical soup, giving rise to manifestations of a reality far different from those experienced by the ordinary townsfolk of Castro Urdiales. He might have been one of the earliest dissenters from Continental rationalism and dualism, and indeed, he may have been inclined to execute an experiment more definitive than anything that could be found in the pages of Philosophy, ancient or modern.

That fateful night when the old priest disappeared in the mist and fell to his death on the rocks below, he could conceivably have summoned up the courage and audacity to test his ruminations. Only after death could he ever hope to get the answer to his question, viz. what survives death and thus what animates life. There's no evidence that he completed this final existential act, but then it's unlikely evidence would ever be have been allowed to surface when the threat to the immortal soul of the old priest was at stake.

Needless to say the town of Castro Urdiales never learned as much as is herein presented. They simply wondered but never too long or too openly. In 1853, ten years after the old priest's accident, the lighthouse of Castro Urdiales was brought into service in the waters off the Cantabrian coast. Yet like its host and their neighbour, it too has become an anachronism in our age of satellite-based global positioning systems. Nonetheless, an uncertain thread in the history of Philosophy appears to have been brought to light ... though its significance remains elusive. The old priest would have conceived it and phrased it differently, but he pulled at one end as we pull at the other when we ask, "are we anything more than just brains in our respective vats?"

Darren—White male. Nearing 60. Unemployed. Fourth time since made redundant during the big bank run of '08. Liberal arts grad. Started as a tape loader but worked up to Director of the Computing Library. Angry, depressed, anxious.

Meds—for years he avoided medication, then a switch flipped, he said. Darren ran through the whole 'roulette wheel' of anti-depressants, benzodiazepines, antipsychotics, mood stabilizers, antiseizure drugs, tranquilizers, and VMAT inhibitors sanctioned by the FDA. During this time, he said he wasn't himself, and no one else recognized him.

Life was bad. His mood ratings bottomed out. He finally hit the wall when he was in a semi-permanent Topiramate fog. He couldn't complete the numbers for a telephone call, couldn't write a simple sentence, couldn't remember the last time he'd bathed. But he wanted it over, and, he thinks that saved his life.

After emergency, he went into detox in what he called the Cuckoo's Nest and worked his way through Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and eliminated his dependency on the 'wheel.' He said he was lucky enough to get a shrink who was able to take notes on something other than a scrip pad.

Three years after hospitalization Darren was more or less restored. He'd been given a second chance, and he knew it. But the world hadn't changed. People hadn't changed. Frustrations mounted, hopes receded, chances were missed. His heart was bitter, his anger seethed, but depression and anxiety were strangely subdued.

Instead of returning to the 'roulette wheel' he kept at CBT, rating his moods, recording the circumstances and the occasioned thoughts, evaluating the evidence driving his thoughts and moods. On compiling dozens of detailed thought records, he'd got to where he could do them mentally, and so stopped keeping count. They helped, though sometimes not, and sometimes not for long. And sometimes not to the pleasure of those around him. But over time, there was a shift in his approach to living with life. It had become more than accommodation. He assumed control, where and inasmuch as was possible. The world didn't change. Other people didn't change. But a new perspective had been cultivated.

During the Black Lives Matter protests, Darren's focus shifted away from perpetual introspection. He attempted to better accept and understand that Black Americans have experienced the depression, anger and bitterness for a lot longer than he had and yet so many still kept hope, despite the recurring repressive view that they were or should be satisfied with their lot.

He related his deep memory of Carrie, in her 80s, five decades before when he'd known her. She was relatively fortunate to have her own home, no catastrophic illnesses, a hardy spirit, and enough employment to get by. But she had always seemed to Darren to be a victim of what he labeled the Southern plantation culture. Her old shack—raised off the ground to keep snakes out—few people would have lived in. Her health, most would have complained about. And her social standing—well, she ate her meals in the hallway while Darren's family ate in the dining room. She was not an Aunt Jemima. Darren was emphatic about that. She may not have been 'woke' to Malcolm X and MLK, Jr., and she was not a dissident in the tradition that intellectuals moon over, but he swore [expletives omitted] and sublimated his [guilt?] in a few tangential remarks of a philoso-

phical nature. As a human being, he said, she knew more about human rights than most, and she couldn't have been blind, deaf, and unfeeling to the unfairness of racism and the absurdity of life predicated on transitory titles, status, and wealth. Could she have expressed it in those terms? Maybe not, but in essentials, yes. Could she have understood it? Again, likely yes, after all, in his view the apprehension of Reality does not require the grand philosophical architecture of 19th century German philosophy. But the means by which we know, well, there we share a common interface, he believed, and a wise person recognizes the limits not just of what we know but how we can know. And wisdom is not so inequitably distributed as is knowledge.

So, yes, Carrie knew, and so he got to know. He said he had to remind himself often that he had lost his mind for nearly three years and had had the good fortune of seeing it restored. For now, he had the physical dexterity to manipulate the buttons on a touchtone phone, and beyond that, he had the confidence to make the calls in familiar and unfamiliar situations. He could read again—not just the simple repetitive sentences he practiced over and over when drugs had numbed his mind, but books—fiction and non-fiction. He became reacquainted with Philosophy—much less of the impressive German idealism and more of ancient stoics. He could write letters to his friends and family, letters that that were intelligible and could be responded to in kind. He could write again. He could look after himself and present himself in public without shame or apology.

He was still unemployed. His disposable income never recovered. His friends got busier. His family didn't like to talk about it. He had always disappointed; there was no otherwise. So what?

He said that he had been proud that he never had been a sheep living by post-it note quotes. So what if he did? He began to relax. He read Epictetus on anxiety. E was someone he'd heard about on the 4th Floor—wise like Jesus, he said, but without the cultural baggage.

He had his mind back. And he felt a distant bond [guilt?] with Carries he learned about—the beggarwoman of Kolkata, the orphan in Georgia ICE, the warehouse worker with two preschoolers, the kid from the mobile home park who shops for his parents—all of whom, unawares, had taught him to see with clearer eyes, to hear with keener ears, and to will with greater persistence. But his interactions had increasingly withdrawn into the world of his imagination ... a world more under control. Reverting to his philosophical sublimations, he began to develop his own take on Leibniz. Accordingly, he believed that in our worlds, individually we are singular owing to physiology, but that singularity does not entail universal significance, as spiritually we are incomplete without others and their singularities. A useful fiction, he admitted and one not sanctioned by logic or science, but so what? And by the by, he added with strength of conviction, the 'best of all possible worlds' was a gratis advert for the ascendant God *du jour*—thus, not a useful fiction. But he was still alone. His philosophy, although linguistically aligned with the practical, remained theoretical, distant, and cold. He had created a new world for himself where his philosophy fit, but where he had also lost intimate contact with the reality of otherness.

The last time I saw Darren, he was in a crowded ER. It had been at least six months since his last session. I was on call that Christmas weekend, which meant I was camping out in my office on the 4th Floor waiting for the next page. He recognized me immediately and from the other side of the room put up ten

fingers and then nine more. I'm sure he saw my relief even though only my eyes were visible above the mask, because he nodded to say he was 'OK.' That was the last time I saw Darren.

We're Having a War, RSVP

(A public outdoor chess table)

What we need is a war? Gets people working. Rallies the country. Fills the pews.

So, you think war is the answer? Would you go? Would you send your son or grandson?

It's a sacrifice ... for the common good.

Better that some die so the rest of us can live peaceably, that it?

You're cynical. Of course there's more to it than that.

What else would that be?

Well, you can always find reasons to go to war. For example, there's no end of genocide and tyranny that needs to be stopped. How about World War II? Wasn't that a just war?

That's reaching pretty far back. What about Afghanistan, Iraq, and Vietnam? Why be so selective?

Well, as I recall that was the last one that brought us all together.

So, do you mean to say that the others may not have been just because they didn't have the nation behind them?

Well, that's part of it.

And the other part?

Actually, you know, in hindsight some of them may have been misguided. I'll grant that the Iraq War after 9/11 was illegal

What? You're saying our country committed a crime by attacking Iraq? Really? Would you say that to your buddies?

Well, I might ... and as a matter of fact I have. But that's politics, and for me ... you know the troops always have to be appreciated for their sacrifice.

There's that word again, sacrifice. So, soldiers risk their lives in battle, in a war that may not be just, and we should honour that?

Well, of course, why shouldn't we?

Because we'll never learn the lesson that war is not a foreign policy tool to be used casually with no regard to human lives.

But doing nothing costs lives, too.

Sometimes.

And there's no knowing in advance that one decision will lead to fewer deaths than another.

Don't think so? Then why have we developed such sophisticated weapons that can be used to wage war almost risk-free? Weapons deployed from thousands of miles away ... from land, sea, and even space.

Well, that's progress ... war safety.

But not for the targets.

Ah, but there you're wrong. Smart weapons target strategic military assets.

And what about non-combatants?

Collateral IS bad, but it's inevitable. People assume risks by being in close proximity to high-value targets.

Is that the language of the common man? Collateral damage is death ... human death. High value targets are always maintained/protected by human beings.

Hold on. Hold on. We're not talking about the bombing of civilian targets.

So, no more talking about bombing a country back to the stone age? Or bombing a country's civilian population to destroy the enemy's war morale? Didn't a famous general once admit that had we lost WWII he'd likely have been tried as a war criminal? And what about President Bush? Wouldn't ... shouldn't he

Let's focus on one thing at time here. Yeah, we bombed European and Asian cities—

... in a just war?

—in World War II. And, you know, it probably did save the lives of a lot of our soldiers.

And one of our soldier's lives carries a higher exchange rate than that of a citizen of a country we're at war with?

There's no such calculus.

Sure about that? Isn't every citizen of every country we're ever at war with necessarily an enemy whose value is thereby less than that of one of ours ... one of our soldiers?

That's war! That's why it's always a last resort.

Is it? With respect to Africa, I'd say you are 100 percent right. Nothing at stake. But was it in Iraq?

Africa ... ah, Africa. Now that's— But Iraq ... Iraq had plenty of warning. You have to admit that. It could have averted war if it had chosen.

And what would that have looked like?

Well, they could have let in our weapons inspection people to investigate all of the sites suspected of supporting chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons development.

But we have stockpiles of all of those kinds of weapons ourselves. Does that mean the world could declare war on us?

Not if they don't want the entire world to go up in a ball of fire.

You mean, our defense, our ultimate defense is a global scorched-earth threat? 'You try to take us down and we'll take out the whole damn planet,' that where you're headed?

That's the risk of providing law and order.

Uh, you mean that a just war—say, in defense of world law and order—warrants the extreme possibility of total annihilation of all countries and all peoples, military and civilian PERSONNEL alike?

It's a deterrent. They'd never seriously threaten us ... the world I mean.

So, our MAD deterrence is a just a bluff ... in case the world tries to hold us to the same standard that we chose to hold Iraq to?

Of course, that's what it comes to, theoretically. How often does it happen that a more powerful force ever has to fall back on that?

But theoretical is always possible, wouldn't you agree?

Yes, but—

And being a more powerful force does not ensure that self-compliance with law and order or just wars, does it?

Well, if you believe in God—

Where did that come from? Are you saying that God's will is being fulfilled in any and every war mankind has waged from our mythical past?

We have a choice. And because we have a choice, we have a responsibility.

And I suppose our choice includes the option of doing whatever we have the means to do, so long as it's for the greater good, a just war, and all that—

Yes, but nations are also guided. Their leaders are—

—marionettes, perhaps? God's Punch and Judy?

Well, no but God is there to ensure that right always wins out.

He or she or it or they DO? Really? And if one life in our country is worth the same as one life in our enemy's country or in a country that has no involvement whatsoever in our dispute, are you implying that God simply has an incredibly high tolerance for—let's call it—collateral damage?

No need to be blasphemous, but yes in the grand scheme of things, right always comes out on top. And fairness is justly distributed afterwards.

And we have evidence of this? I'm seeing that you're taking me for a complete imbecile. We can and do have the right to wage just war, and the loss of innocent life, whether intentional or accidental is acceptable, because when this great cosmic board game ends the game master will make sure that all the players are fairly rewarded?

You make a mockery of what we hold most dear, but in essence you are correct.

I, sir, don't make a mockery. You mock yourself; you mock humanity; you mock your God.

I don't expect you to understand. As the master says, the truth is there for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

Ah, yes the master!

Yes, and you'd benefit immensely by taking a few pages from his Book.

Rules of the game, is it?

Your negativity is exasperating, young man. When you've lived as long as I have you will realize that the world is far more complicated than you ever conceived.

Sounds like rote-learning is what you advocate.

Experience and wisdom, yes they count for a lot.

OK, but if I get drafted and don't return, you'll remember our conversation?

And I'd pray for your immortal soul, my boy! Checkmate!

(King falls on its side)

Damn!

A good game, son. I'm here Tuesday and Thursday mornings as long as nature's elements see fit. And I'll be pleased to give you a rematch.

(Another shoves into the seat being vacated)

Excuse me! Hey Granddad! I watched your end game. You're pretty good. Care to give me a try?

Absolutely, please come and have a seat and we'll play a fine, fair game, my boy.

I'm not a boy, old man, and I don't care for all the chit-chat. Your wisdom you can keep to yourself. Let's play chess!

At your service, always at your service. *Tu choisis mon ami.* You're white.

Alright. E4. Pawn to King's pawn four.

Are those Armani's? They suit your face. Very photogenic.
Lennon ... John, yes, that's the name. E5.

The Amaladoss Loop

My shrink, MD, PhD (ABD), OMG, ROFL - keys to the Beamer in 1 hand, scrips in the other - knows just enough 2B dangerous. Am better now ;-}

Previously lost tweet for the much-anticipated one-act stage play adaptation of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

Lots in this legacy neighbourhood of this wealthy bedroom community in the Toronto orbit were going for \$1.5 to \$1.9 million. Yes, the market was hot ... hotter than it had ever been. Who would have thought ... in the middle of a global pandemic that housing prices in Fauxville would skyrocket.

Art didn't. Art had had little foresight and way too much hindsight. In fact he lived the better part of his octogenarian years in the past ... with all his familiars ... people, places, and things. Living in the present was a prickly affair. No, that's wrong. Art was prickly, and living in the present was excruciatingly painful in a mentally torturous sort of way. All these newcomers. High end—conspicuously so—young families, teenagers, and street kids. He was surrounded by excess youth, vitality, and affluence, although for him it was incessant playfulness, silliness, and outright childishness. Snowmobiles driving down the side streets after a goodly snow. Go Karts and ATVs running amok on and off roads and through and around and around in town parks. Large parties late into the night, streets crammed with cars parked on both sides of the road leaving one lane open, and LOUD music ... what forty years ago was good Rock-n-Roll. But for Art's sake, it needed to be peaceful and quiet at night time. Too much noise, too many visual nuisances disrupted the serenity in which his memories blossomed in the hazy mistiness of years gone by.

He'd said the last place he wanted to live was in Fauxville, but he meant that in a positive way; however, as he grew closer to his terminus and as house prices rose higher, Art began to experience a re-birth, a rejuvenation, a renaissance as the prospect of a gargantuan money haul seeded his mind with the avaricious thoughts. He had a wonderful lot—private among the

mostly lot-sized MacMansions that were infilling Fauxville at an accelerating pace. With a little finagling, he figured he could get \$4 million. He knew the town councillors and had a pretty good rapport with the development-minded mayor, so he calculated that by severing his property, he could get up to three good sized lots for the two-storey frat house or dormitory design so common. Yes, Art was feeling very confident and exuberant, as much as an octogenarian can, and he made it manifest in so many startling ways in his little community.

First, he began saying 'Hello' to people. That was the first BIG hump he had to get over. He couldn't retreat into what the neighbourhood *enfants terribles* (upscale brats, guttersnipes, and urchins) called 'the hermitage' if he wanted that cash haul. Then he determined to take morning and evening walks through the neighbourhood to increase his contact with the 'new people.' Schmoozing, however repugnant at this stage in life, had been a way of doing business for decades, so he could put up with it for a little while until he could cash in ... then, to hell with the neighbourhood. He'd be gone. A house on the east coast of Labrador, another somewhere on the Pacific Coast. Not sure yet whether North or South America. And he began sprucing up the place, bringing contractors in to update his modest raised bungalow and spiffy up the landscaping on the property. He bought himself a sporty little German sedan and suddenly he was fitting in. It wasn't as difficult as he'd thought. And the rewards ... ah, maybe even a roommate. He was often told he looked years younger than his age, and he was feeling it, too.

One Sunday morning, at the height of the fall colour, he was taking stock of his property—not in the way he once had of puttering around fixing things here and cleaning up a little there, but just basking in the pleasure of ownership ... his mind

wrapped around 7-digit dollar signs—when a young couple came cycling past ... slowly. They were so cute in their matching cyclist gear and friendly—they were certainly that, too.

He'd never seen them before—not to recollect anyway—but they looked the sort he had been falling in with of late. Youthful, energetic, and successful. The young woman revealed the purpose of their passing visit with charming innocence as she said quite directly, "We'd like to buy your house." Acquisitive, too, mused Art. Years before in his blue period, Art would have abruptly and insultingly ended the conversation right then and there, but this was a new Art, and he who had nearly died living in the past was now eagerly anticipating the unfolding of a future, partly under his control. Art invited them in for a cup of coffee.

The couple nodded approvingly taking in the development potential of the property as they glided up to the front door. Art noticed this and he didn't play coy. He acknowledged quite matter-of-factly that the property was roughly the equivalent in size of three neighbouring properties, adding that the town was becoming very accommodating towards land severances.

The young couple seated themselves in the middle of the black leather sofa, which commanded a broad view of the lot through the front, rear, and side windows. Art brought in the coffee and the three of them, seated, looked at one another as if to say, "Who would like to speak first?"

The young woman eased into the conversation by asking a few prompting questions to invite Art to reveal something of his attachment to the house and yard. Art obliged. He condensed 50 years into a few minutes—impatient to get a glimpse of his new future—and as he spoke he observed a slight twitch in the

young woman's left eye. He didn't mention it, but she observed that he was observing and so she preempted him by saying that she just had a fleck of road dust or debris in her eye. "Comes with cycling," she said, "even when I'm wearing goggles." Art nodded.

Here the young man stepped in to resume the conversation, shifting it closer towards the true object of the impromptu coffee klatch. He praised Art for his sense of modern lighting and lightness, and inclining his head towards the front picture window and then the side and rear floor-to-ceiling blinds-in-the-glass windows, he marveled at the extraordinary view of the park-like backyard with its layering of bushes and small trees, revealing foliage and fruit in multiple shades of red, orange, and green and purple. And in the distance, brilliant yellow ginkgo and orange-berried mountain ash, crimson maple and drooping willows fronting a tall deep green cedar hedge that ran along the edge of the property. No houses were within 100 metres, and the two that would be partially visible in winter would be mostly blocked by the dense network of tree branches that reached upwards and above the houses.

Art sat listening and reminiscing, occasionally stealing a glance over at the young woman whose tic continued. A spark. What? He glanced again at the young woman's face. Her left eye was still twitching but now inside her blue iris, it was arcing. The young man tried to divert Art's attention, but Art unable to maintain propriety stared at the arcing eye.

"We want to buy your house," said the young man, standing as he said it. Art shook his head as if to clear cobwebs, then the young man added in a firm monotonic voice, "We WILL buy your house." The eye and now the voice. Who are these peo-

ple?, thought Art. They're not like the young couples in the neighbourhood.

The young man moved to the front picture window and drew the cream-coloured velvet drapes closed, and the young woman closed the blinds at the back. Now, in the dull light of morning excluded, Art's heart raced. His breathing kept pace. Turning to face one then the other, Art watched in spasms of terror as the young couple peeled the skin back from their shiny metallic faces.

The Flannan Isles are scattered at the end of the world, at least from a Scottish perspective looking out to the west over the North Atlantic. Six hundred miles to the northwest is Iceland. Greenland is an additional 700 miles away, and Labrador is nearly 2,000 miles on the other side of the ocean. The seven islets and the multitude of skerries are part of an archipelago in the Outer Hebrides off the northwest coast of Scotland. It is a lonely place, and it is a stormy place. In the winter, the mountainous ocean waves and the gale force winds are bitterly cold and deadly.

In 1899, the lighthouse of the Flannan Isles became operational, it having been commissioned four years earlier to protect sailors and their cargo from the deadly rocks and reefs that had claimed the lives of so many in these frigid, treacherous waters where titanic gale-driven waves would smash wooden sailing ships to smithereens.

In December of 1900, the three keepers of the lighthouse were reported to have disappeared ... vanished with no trace that has been discovered to this day. Their disappearance remains a mystery, but there is no shortage of proffered explanations. The 2018 the British psychological thriller, *The Vanishing*, is the mariner's tale of stolen golden and murder teased from the known facts and folklore of the Eilean Mór disappearance. Nearly six score years earlier, a rescue party from the SS Hesperus (not Longfellow's ill-fated schooner shipwrecked on a snowy Atlantic night off Norman's Woe) telegraphed the Northern Lighthouse Board (NLB) responsible for navigation along Scotland's craggy coastline that the island and lighthouse were deserted and concluded that the "[p]oor fellows they must been blown over the cliffs or drowned trying to secure a crane or

something like that." This was Boxing Day 1900, 11 days after the lighthouse had been reported unlit by the *Archtor* steamer en route from Philadelphia to Edinburgh.

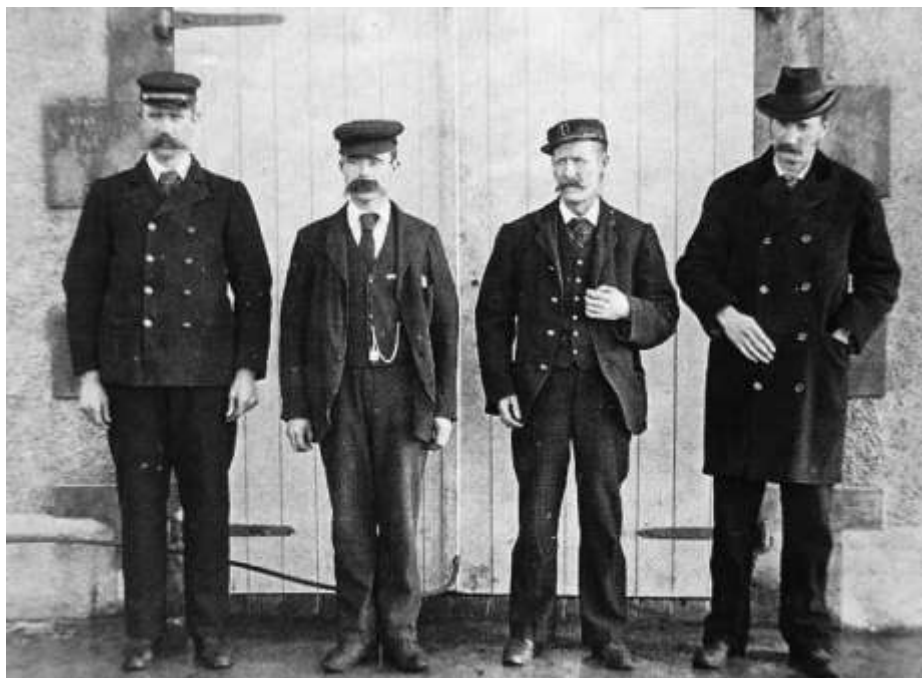


Photo 4: Flannan Isle Keepers and NLB Superintendent (1900)

Drawing from the limited evidence at hand, the Board's investigation directed by Superintendent Robert Muirhead concluded that the most likely explanation was that the lighthouse keepers "had all gone down on the afternoon of Saturday, 15 December to the proximity of the West landing, to secure the box with the mooring ropes, etc and that an unexpectedly large roller had come up on the Island, and a large body of water going up higher than where they were and coming down upon them had swept them away with resistless force."

Other accounts of varying believability include internecine and murderous strife among the 'wickies,' ghost ships of the Seven

Hunters (a local name for the islands, which locals said 'hunted' ships), and alien abductions, but one that has failed to attract serious attention attributes the disappearance to the British-German arms race that was just taking off in the 1890s. The Imperial German Navy under Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz of the new German Empire was gearing up to challenge the naval supremacy of Britain whose own naval policy objective as of 1889 was to maintain naval superiority to the combined naval strength of its two closest rivals. During World War I, Tirpitz masterminded the strategy of unrestricted submarine warfare in order to project Germany's naval power beyond European waters in answer to the superiority of Britain's surface fleet.

In December 1900, a merchant vessel, commandeered by the Imperial German Navy, was reconnoitering the North Atlantic. At Eilean Mór it dispatched a dinghy to obtain fresh lamb and mutton knowing that lighthouse keepers on the remote western isles had to raise their own livestock. The German sailors encountered resistance but as they were armed the keepers were easily subdued. The animals were slaughtered and the fresh meat was taken to the ship along with the keepers, who were now prisoners. On boarding the German ship, the captain assured the keepers that they would be freed unharmed upon reaching the shores of Canada.[1]

After setting course for Iceland, the ship lost communication with its port in Wilhelmshaven. It had disappeared in a mid-December North Atlantic storm of great fury and duration that caused much damage to Eilean Mór from bottom to top indicating seas of upwards of 100 feet. Waves of that height would easily have swamped the German vessel.

Records of the ship's disappearance are unreliable as the German Navy of the period was intent on keeping its mission

secret for fear of inflaming anti-German sentiment in North America at a time when Germany's defences were not altogether sufficient to protect against being Copenhagened by the Royal Navy. And so the mystery of the Flannan Isles Lighthouse is in fact part of a much greater mystery—the disappearance of an unidentified German merchant vessel in 1900 somewhere in the vicinity of the Scottish Hebrides.

Meanwhile, in the 21st century lighthouses are passing into obsolescence. While these sentinels on the coast entertain us with their histories and romance, they simply are not commercially mission critical. With technological innovations—computer automation and satellite-based global positioning systems, balance-sheet economics has rendered the lighthouse and its rough-hewn keepers cost-inefficient and superfluous notwithstanding the tens of thousands of lives saved, thereby hastening the end of part of our common history of the sea—the seafarers' beacon, mysterious, awe-inspiring, and hopeful.

Ironically, the same silicon-based technology that has facilitated the redundancy of lighthouses and their keepers worldwide saving governments high-profile yet paltry sums of money—the low-hanging fruit—has also enabled the modern pirates of finance to evade taxes by hiding their 'gold' in offshore accounts and behind tailor-made tax avoidance legislation, aided and abetted by their political servants and their retinue of money-men.

However, the announcing of the end of the lighthouse era may be premature as the vulnerability of satellite-based guidance systems to terrorist or state-sponsored cyberwarfare may produce a resurgence in the strategic value of lighthouses as global shipping will for the foreseeable future continue to be fundamental to the economies of Earth. And who knows but

what the keepers themselves may return as the magic and mystery of the lighthouse are rekindled.

Notes

[1] Eighteen years later, as part of Germany's U-boat campaign in the North Atlantic, a German submarine off the coast of New Brunswick near the mouth of the Bay of Fundy sank the timber-laden Dornfontein, a four-masted schooner in the Canadian merchant marine that had just set sail for South Africa (a WWI ally, albeit somewhat reluctant after the Boer War) from its home port of Saint John. The Dornfontein crew were taken prisoner aboard the submarine and much to their surprise served blueberry pie from freshly-picked Nova Scotia blueberries. The Canadians were set afloat in dories after five hours on board the submarine and were picked up by the keepers of the Gannet Rock Lighthouse at the mouth of the Bay ... in good health save for the one sailor who was shot in the knee for refusing der Blaubeer-Streuselkuchen which he claimed—to his loss—was poisoned. Today, there are no longer any lighthouse keepers on Gannet Rock.

A Rushed Conclusion

The blizzard blowing from the northeast across Lake Ontario did not augur a safe or comfortable journey from Upper Canada's capital, York (now Toronto), to the Presqu'ile peninsula, site of the new district town to the east. The captain, Lieutenant Thomas Paxton, a British naval officer, expressed strong reservations, but the dignitaries of the fledgling colony of Upper Canada (now Ontario) were insistent, and the captain was threatened with a court martial. The prisoner had to be transported immediately to the new courthouse/jail in Presqu'ile in order to meet the demands of justice in the case of one Oge-tonicut of the Ojibwe people, the accused murderer of a white man, a Hudson's Bay trader.



Photo 5: H.M.S. Speedy by C.H.J. Snider

The year was 1804 and it was a cold October day. Aboard the *Speedy*—one of the hastily-constructed 60-foot, two-masted schooners armed with 4 cannon that were built to counter the threat posed by the newly independent United States of America—were some of Upper Canada's political elites: the High Constable, the Solicitor-General, a judge from the Court of King's Bench, a Lieutenant in the York Militia, a justice of the peace, and a defence attorney and member of the House of Assembly. The presence of so many important figures from the young colony reflected a grim reality, viz. that the case of the Ojibwe man was all but decided. His trial was to be a singular moment in the demonstration of British dominion over the new district of Newcastle (now eastern Ontario). Six handwritten copies of the colony's new constitution were on board to formally legitimate jurisdiction.

On that evening, the *Speedy* disappeared, and to this day the wreck of the *Speedy* has not been discovered. Only a chicken coop and a compass box were ever washed ashore. Though claims to the contrary have been made, no definitive record of the shipwreck has been accepted. The explanations of the shipwreck are varied and conjectural.

Among the attempts to explain the disappearance and probable sinking of the *Speedy*, the leading contender appears to be that the bonfires lit at the tip of the Presqu'ile peninsula failed to penetrate the heavy snowfall and guide the ship to the narrow channel while gale force winds carried the ship away from the point and further out into the lake. There it likely struck an underwater rock—the Devil's Horseblock, a granite pinnacle rising up from the lake floor to within inches of the surface—that had been spotted in 1803 but never charted. When the ship hit the rock, its hull would have been breached dooming the vessel, its crew, and its contingent of prominent personages. The strike

powered by the winds and waves of the wintry storm would likely have been forceful enough to dislodge the top of the granite rock, and its ensuing collapse and sinking would conceivably have triggered a sufficiently strong whirlpool that would have easily sucked the crippled ship under. Subsequent attempts to locate the granite pinnacle or its remains have failed, which lends some support to this account.

Another account has it that the gales spun the ship around and sent it careening deeper into the centre of the lake somewhere between Presqu'ile Point and the southern shore in upper New York state. Magnetic anomalies in the area—sometimes referred to as the Sophiasburgh Triangle—may have contributed to the ship's loss of direction and eventual sinking. Based on this premise, a much larger part of eastern Lake Ontario would have had to be searched to find the underwater wreck, so it should not be surprising that the more precisely targeted searches conducted to date have failed.

Perhaps the most entertaining theory was proposed in the 2014 thesis of a Kingston ESL instructor and Cultural Studies' student of First Nations' mythology at Queen's University, entitled 'Mythological Legends of the Great Lakes.' According to Trisha Palmer, shipwrecks in the Great Lakes, particularly at the eastern end of Lake Ontario near the St. Lawrence River—the so-called Marysburgh Vortex—are physical manifestations of disturbances in the spiritual realm characterized by fantastic creatures with mystical powers. One of the Ojibwe's lake monsters is Mishipeshu, a dragon whose head resembles a large cat with horns. Mishipeshu is said to be responsible for the powerful storm waves and whirlpools that have seized ships and plunged them into the deep, dark, cold waters of Lake Superior. According to the Seneca, an Iroquois Nation, Gaasyendietha, the meteor dragon, hunts the waters of Lake

Ontario, and is, for Ms. Palmer, as good a proximate cause of the Speedy's demise as any that has been proposed in the past two centuries. Some hitherto undiscovered, and still unauthenticated, tape recordings of Seneca oral history mention a legendary underwater monster in the eastern waters of Lake Ontario near Prince Edward County, an island severed by the Murray Canal in the 1880s to provide a safer and more direct route alternative to the island's rocky southern coastline. The lighthouse on the top of the Presqu'ile peninsula, built in 1840, lights the way to the western end of the canal and provides the very beacon that was missing on that perilous evening on the 2nd Monday of October in 1804 when all souls aboard the Speedy were lost.

All the above and more, including a two-hour documentary on the Graveyard of the Great Lakes can be found at the United Empire Loyalists' Museum in Picton on Trafalgar Road between Ye Old Sailor's Arm and Treadwell's Fish and Chips. In addition, the Presqu'ile and Quinte Bay Area Chambers of Commerce, Triple-A members of the BBB, recommend Captain Samuel's three-hour tour from the east end of the Murray Canal through the Bay of Quinte around the island of Prince Edward County and back through the canal by way of Presqu'ile Bay. More shipwreck mysteries are related by the captain, an ancient but gregarious nautical folklorist, as the tour boat skirts the ghostly northern coast of Lake Ontario.

The Ghosts of Skerryvore

At the south end of the Hebrides about 100 miles out to sea west of Glasgow and 100 miles north of Derry (Londonderry) lies Skerryvore, from the Gaelic *Sgeir Mhòr* (big rock). Skerry is a common term for a rock that surfaces from the underwater reefs around the northern British Isles. Completed and operational since 1844 stands the Skerryvore Lighthouse, tallest of the Scottish lighthouses, a gracefully tapered cylindrical granite sea tower 156 feet tall with a 42-foot diameter base and a 16-foot diameter apex. The interlocking granite blocks form a solid frustum up to 26 feet after which the walls are 9.5 feet thick gradually narrowing towards the top of the tower. This tower was built with lessons learned from one of Britain's first offshore lighthouses, the first Eddystone lighthouse, which was swept off its rock near the Cornish coast during the Great Storm of 1703.



Photo 6: Skerryvore, 19th century engraving, via Wikimedia Commons

Alan Stevenson from the engineering Stevenson clan—his nephew, Robert Louis, author of *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*, and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, being the notable exception and the only one in five generations of Stevenson men—designed the lighthouse, it being one of 13 Scottish lighthouses for which he could claim credit.

The waters of Skerryvore are notoriously dangerous due to the fierceness of the unchecked Atlantic climate to the west and the shallow, rocky reefs off the coast of Scotland and Ireland. In 1814 on a survey of the area, Sir Walter Scott, in the company of Robert Stevenson, chief engineer of the Northern Lighthouse Board descriptively reported

a long ridge of rocks (chiefly under water), on which the tide breaks in a most tremendous style. There appear a few low broad rocks at one end of the reef, which is about a mile in length. These are never entirely under water though the surf dashes over them. Pull through a very heavy swell with great difficulty, and approach a tremendous surf dashing over black pointed rocks... It will be a most desolate position for a Lighthouse.¹

Later that year the British Parliament passed legislation for the creation of a lighthouse on Skerryvore; however, work didn't commence until almost two-and-a-half decades latter owing to the formidable task of constructing a giant lighthouse on a rocky reef in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean and the fact that construction of lighthouses of lesser difficulty were of compara-

¹ Much of the material included in this account of the Skerryvore ghost ship—excepting the ghost ship itself—is sourced from Alan Stevenson's *Account of the Skerryvore Lighthouse* published in 1848 on behalf of the Commissioners of the Northern Lighthouses.

ble urgency. Nevertheless, a lighthouse for Skerryvore would have to be built, as this treacherous reef had accounted for more than 30 shipwrecks between 1790 and 1844 according to Rev. Neil Maclean, the Minister of Tyree and Coll, a keen observer of the maritime happenings near his island. But that number was thought to be far too low as many foreign ships passing through the North Irish Channel likely met their end on these reefs though little remained to prove the wrecks as the rough seas around Skerryvore are powerful and frequent enough to sweep and keep the rocks clean. Engineer Stevenson asserted as much when he wrote, "Very many vessels were wrecked on this dangerous reef whose names could never be learned, and of which nothing but portions of the drift wood or cargo came ashore; and there have, no doubt, been many shipwrecks of which not a single trace has been left."

Integral to the maritime function of the lighthouse were the lighthouse keepers, nicknamed 'wickies' as one of their crucial duties was to trim the wicks to keep the lights atop the tower bright and clean as it reflected through the complex of lenses—polished daily along with all the brassworks—that propagated the light miles out to sea.² Three keepers were assigned to the

² The following stanzas are drawn from 'Brasswork: The Lighthouse Keeper's Lament' by Frederic W. Morong, Jr., a New England district machinist in the U.S. Lighthouse Service in the early 20th century.

I dig, scrub and polish, and work with a might,
And just when I get it all shining and bright,
In comes the fog like a thief in the night:
Good-by Brasswork....

The lamp in the tower, reflector and shade,
The tools and accessories pass in parade
As a matter of fact the whole outfit is made
Of Brasswork.

remote lighthouses—a built-in redundancy or fail-safe—so that in case of injury or illness, the rotation of the watch could continue unbroken. Relief from boredom and maintenance of sanity were also factors justifying three keepers on an isolated rock in the ocean, all to ensure, in the words of Longfellow:

[That] the great ships sail outward and return,
Bending and bowing o'er the billowy swells,
And ever joyful, as they see it burn,
They wave their silent welcomes and farewells.³

In the early days of the Skerryvore Lighthouse, stormbound for three months, with no company but seals and gulls, and ever-diminishing rations, the three keepers struggled to maintain their sanity and their strength to keep the light shining for the long nights of November and the foghorn sounding in the dense fogs that often swallowed the light. Always on the lookout for ships—a keeper's obsession—they finally spied one ... or rather heard sounds from one during a particularly ferocious gale that had risen up unexpectedly from the southwest. Visibility was too poor to discern the shape of anything in the distance, but the sounds of screams could be made out despite the roaring winds and crashing waves, and then a single cannon shot punctuated nature's onslaught. To the keepers, this signalled a vessel in distress—a vessel that had likely been driven by the heavy weather onto the submerged reef.

The next morning, the keepers scoured the main rock as well as nearby rocks that could be reached safely by dinghy in seas that were still unsettled, but they discovered no signs of ship wreckage or crew, only masses of tangled seaweed strewn

³ This extract is from 'The Lighthouse' (1849), a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

about on the slippery rocks. Unable to communicate with the shore station on Tyree, the keepers had no one with whom they could confirm or disconfirm what the three of them had heard the previous night. Only when the lighthouse tender arrived three days later with the new rotation of lighthouse keepers did the men finally have a chance to relate their experience. Their haggard and emaciated forms were more disturbing than the tale they related, as such phenomena had often been related by keepers too long isolated and confined to a rock in the ocean. More often than not they were phantoms ... or appeared to be.

Nevertheless, the report had to be treated seriously, and so it was dispatched to the Northern Lighthouse Board where an investigation was initiated. The disappearance of a registered vessel in the southern Hebrides during that late November storm could not be confirmed, though given the history of shipwrecks off the coast of western Scotland, a shipwreck could not be discounted. For a couple of weeks, some of the sensationalist press in Britain carried the story of a ghost ship that tormented lighthouse keepers in the remote Atlantic lighthouses of the western Scottish coast.

None of the keepers who heard the sounds of drowning men that night—men who were never seen whole or otherwise—ever returned to the sea. They all settled inland. The principal keeper purchased a share in a naval store in Glasgow; the assistant married and raised sheep near the English border, while the occasional keeper secured an apprenticeship with a blacksmith, who had once served in the Royal Navy at the end of the Napoleonic Wars.

Today, the lighthouse at Skerryvore is automated, and GPS-aided navigation has become the primary means of steering

shipping around and past the underwater dangers of the sea. Sailors are still guided from the sky, though now from man-made beacons in space, and computer operators keep the lights on ... just in case.

At the beginning of the 20th century, commercial shipping through the Great Lakes was dangerous. It still can be—the indomitable Edmund Fitzgerald went down in 1975—but inland navigation through the Lakes is much safer than it was a century ago. Harbours and navigation channels were not always sufficiently deep and free of submerged hazards, and detailed underwater maps were incomplete and inaccurate. Rocky shoals and cross-current whirlpools have for centuries been the bane of seafarers and—since the colonization of North America—their inland water counterparts.

On a stormy late-November night in 1906, the coal-laden *Resolute* on its way to make a delivery for the Toronto Electric Light Company sank just outside the Toronto harbour. The ship was leaking after enduring severe gales at the western end of Lake Ontario, and heavy weather off the Toronto Islands prevented entry through the Eastern Gap forcing the captain to sail around the southern edge of the islands and attempt an entry into the harbour through the shallower Western Gap.

The western entrance, however, was too shallow as the *Resolute* was drawing too much water to pass safely across the rocky shoal, so the captain anchored the ship off the westernmost island, hoping to ride out the storm, but the leaking turned to flooding and the ship's pumps were no match for the incoming water.

Meanwhile waves were crashing over the long, exposed deck of the 136' steamer—a type commonly referred to as 'coffins' owing to their vulnerability to severe weather—and washing large quantities of coal into the lake. The ship had to be abandoned, so both lifeboats were launched, one to port and the other to

starboard. As soon as the first was filled with crew members, high swells and strong winds capsized the craft, and all aboard, though outfitted with life belts, drowned within sight of shore. The second lifeboat narrowly escaped being sucked under as the *Resolute* went down with the captain and engineer riding the cabin roof which had been ripped off the ship until even this makeshift raft was severed in two. One survived—the captain, John Sullivan.

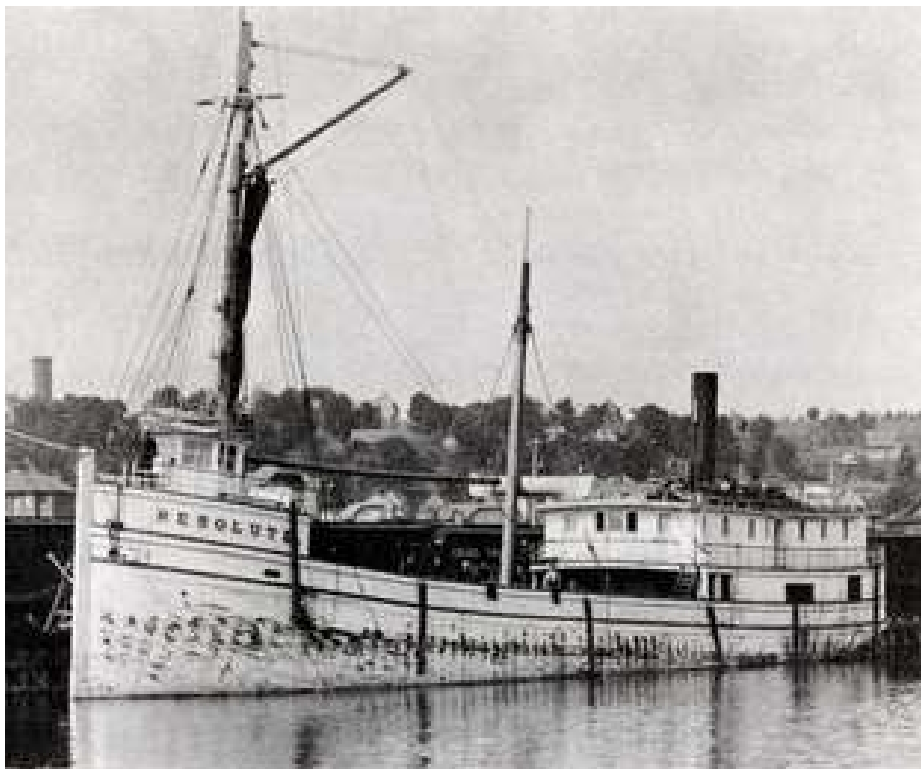


Photo 7: *Resolute*, Midland, Ontario pre-1906

In a front-page editorial, *The Globe* (now *The Globe and Mail*) published this:

The appalling loss of life through the wreck of the *Resolute* is the more affecting because it happened at our very doors.... Within sight and sound of this great city, these men perished for lack of the least share of

that concern freely expended in many directions in the interest of those who need is nothing compared with that of the toilers of the unsalted seas They died because of the callousness with which the responsibility of providing an efficient life-saving service has been shifted from one quarter to another, and their beaten and disfigured bodies cast up on the beach cry aloud. (*Globe* editorial, November 23, 1906)

In recounting this history, it is worth emphasizing that most of the blame is deservedly laid at the doorstep of Canada, a fledgling nation with the usual shortcomings of inexperienced governance—in this case, the federal government's dithering over dredging the Toronto harbour to accommodate larger vessels of commerce. Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe that the insidious residual anti-American sentiments of United Empire Loyalists and their sympathizers may have contributed significantly to the deaths of the six men.

It is no secret that the Ontario—formerly the British colony of Upper Canada—and the Toronto of the day were overtly and overly pro-British to the point that Canadian soldiers had followed Britain to the southern end of Africa to fight in the turn-of-the-century Boer War—a war, incidentally, opposed by Quebecois who looked on the South African Dutch as a suppressed linguistic minority not unlike themselves.

Recent research, by a doctoral student in anthropological limnology at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, Olivier Mboukou, from Africa's Great Lakes region, evidences notes and correspondence from reporters and officials of the period documenting pronounced antipathy towards Americans (Yankees) as well as uncorroborated oral histories of seamen and dockworkers, which coalesce around a common view that, in fact, no rescue was attempted because none was ordered. The

irony is that the *Resolute* was a Canadian steamer, although it had left the American port of Erie, Pennsylvania and counted Americans among its crew.

Among the pre-publication scraps of history set down come comments such as these from two of the survivors:

I never saw a country such as this. No appliances for saving life in a city like this. Here I was drenching wet and no place to poke my head into or get a dry stitch. When I came out of the harbourmaster's house I heard a man crying for help in a heart-breaking way and I took a boat out to search for him.

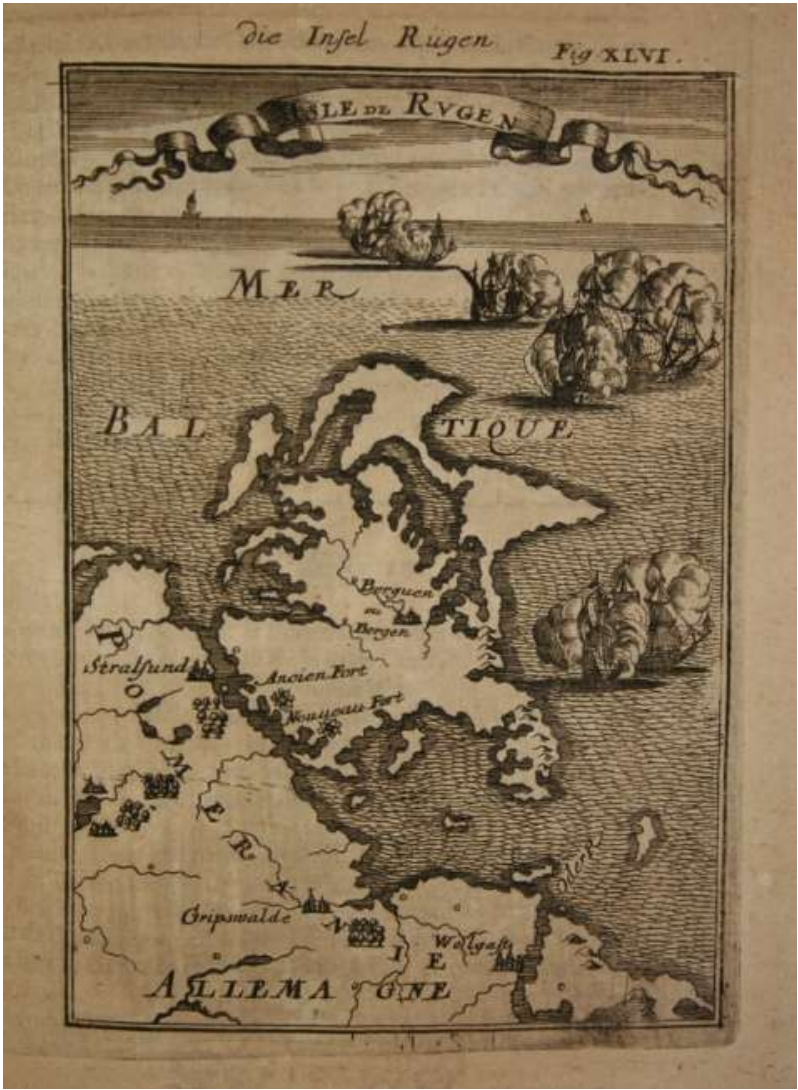
They refused to take us in. I was a lucky man to land with 25 cents in my pocket. They gave us drink but sent us down the road to a hotel, soaked to the skin and so numbed with cold we could barely move. Had this been in the United States the crew would have been furnished with dry clothes and warm food.

And this for ship that was "a regular in the Toronto harbour." At the beginning of the 20th century it was no safe haven for mariners from all parts. No safe haven from "the fury of the great gale of the lakes no man may describe" as the *Globe* editorial put it.

For the crew of the *Resolute*, their Scylla was the rocky shoal of the Western Gap, and their Charybdis was created by the Great Lakes' gales of November. Though land was near, there was no rescue and no safe harbour ... not in Toronto ... not in 1906.

On Rügen

The chalk-white cliffs against the backdrop of Baltic blue is an enduring image of Rügen. Another aspect is the island outline's resemblance to an east-facing mythical dragon having just been scalped. At the time Saxo Grammaticus, the 12th century Danish historian in the service of Absalon, Archbishop of Lund,



**Map 1: Rügen Island 1685, Alain Manesson Mallet,
via Wikimedia Commons**

was writing about Rügen in Book Fourteen of *Gesta Danorum* (The History of the Danes), the "connection between Rügen and the island of Wittow, on which Arkona stands, is cut off by a narrow sea channel, which scarcely appears to reach the breadth of a river." In this 17th century map, the 'scalp' is attached to the rest of the island of Rügen as is the case today, so that the island of Wittow is now the Wittow Peninsula on whose northeastern tip are the lighthouses—the three-storey Schinkel Tower built by Prussia in 1828 and the adjacent, newer and taller lighthouse built by the German Empire in 1902. From the newer tower, the Danish island of Møn is visible on clear days. Its beacon reaches 22 miles out to sea, i.e., within range of the Arkona Basin wind farm to the northeast.



Map 2: Northern Germany, *Gesta Danorum*

Over the centuries, Rügen has been strategically important for commerce and war due to its location on the southwest Baltic coast, just east of the shipping lanes between the Baltic and North seas bounded by Sweden, Germany, and Denmark. Ownership of the island has passed through numerous hands—the Rani (a Wendish or Slavic people) as early as the 9th century, the Danes through the newly-established Principal-

Shipping in the Baltic was dangerous throughout the Middle Ages and beyond owing to stormy weather, shallow coastal waters, frequent wars among kingdoms and the merchant cities of the Hanseatic League, and piracy, some of the latter having been state-sponsored. The shallow coastal waters of the northern coastline continue to be made shallower by the constant erosion of the island's famous chalk cliffs. Today, more than two-thirds of the footprint of the ancient Jaromarsburg temple-fortress of the Rani has collapsed into the sea. Estimates place the average centenary coastal recession at around 25 metres with the duration and intensity of wave action at the base and rain saturation at the top being the principal causes.

Looking back to medieval Rügen, the Baltic clime was harsh then, too. As testimony to its severity, the strength of the powerful Rani fleet was decimated in 1157 by a fierce storm that wrecked 1,500 ships and left Rügen vulnerable to King Valdemar and the Danes. Describing maritime conditions at the time, Saxo relates that "the seas were whipped into a fury and became so tempestuous that neither harbour nor anchors could secure the royal [Danish] fleet and prevent it from being dispersed and scattered over the deep." As to the gruesomeness of the off-again, on-again Baltic wars, after one battle, Saxo depicts the sea off Rügen as "hardly navigable owing to the welter of corpses."

In 1168, the Danes finally conquered the Rani and claimed Rügen for the Kingdom of Denmark. The Jaromarsburg, naturally protected on three sides by cliffs "whose summit exceeded the trajectory of an arrow shot from a crossbow" was burned to the ground, as was the temple of Svantovit. The larger-than-life totem of the Rani's deity of war and abundance, celebrated throughout the Baltic region (reportedly with proto-Christian *autos-de-fé*), was chopped into pieces and used as fuel for

cooking the food for the captive Rani. Completing the conquest, timber from the siege machines was re-purposed to construct a Christian church, giving rise to Saxo's remark that the Danes had transformed the weapons of war against the Rani "to saving their souls." King Valdemar and Bishop Absalon—the Christian Vikings—had finally accomplished the destruction of the enemy fortifications on Rügen, and the recently converted Danes had eliminated the pagan religion in accordance with the Pope's encyclicals, all further to the Dane's more immediate objective of establishing a stronger presence in the Baltic.

More than 850 years later, Rügen and the Baltic are at peace, but in the history of the Baltic that is a recent development. However, the sea is now the setting for an era of different warfare—the war against nature. The Baltic Sea is one of the world's most polluted bodies of water. It is a sea nearly enclosed and cut off from the re-circulating currents of the Atlantic, and it has been filled with the carcasses of thousands of ships over hundreds of years, including the mysterious sinking of the ferry, *Estonia*, in 1994 in which more than 800 people drowned. Was it a *force majeure* or an errant post-Soviet submarine? The underwater wreck is a gravesite, and on-site investigations have been disallowed by the Swedish government, so the answer is more than just elusive.

Since the mid-20th century, the Baltic has become one of the world's great dumping grounds for conventional and chemical munitions from the two World Wars. The waters surrounding Rügen were convenient hiding places for conventional weapons, and the Gotland Deep, because of its greater depth, became a notorious dump for World War I mustard gas deposits. As not all of these offshore waste sites have been mapped, particularly in the case of corrosive and explosive chemical weapons, there is an ongoing threat to the Nord Stream off-

shore gas pipelines from Russia to Germany. And that is not the full extent of the environmental war on the Baltic, as there is nuclear waste from the east, raw sewage from the east, not to mention tons of useless parts from stripped-down vehicles being shipped to the east.



Map 4: Ammunition Dumping Sites via Coastal Wiki

But all that is beneath the surface and out of sight. From Kap Arkona, tourists can, and hundreds of thousands a year do, still see the blue Baltic, flat to the horizon where, above sea level anyway, "there is nowhere to hide and plenty of room for vision." Nevertheless, the "zinc-gray breakers" and the "seagull's metal cry" signal an ominous and encroaching threat ... this time from the east.

Notes

[1] Recent unpublished, research by Irving Meyer, an author in the historical horror genre who also traces his ancestry to Rügen, suggests that the transitional periods of the island's history were often accompanied by preternatural phenomena. Meyer cites Saxo's reference to "a devil ... seen departing from the inmost shrine in the guise of a black animal" as Jaromarsburg was burned to the ground in 1168. Other evidence, such

as the shadowy vision encountered by Charlemagne, is somewhat less rigorously documented. Nevertheless, Meyer adduces numerous instances where mysterious and ephemeral figures—often grotesque half-man, half-beast creatures—were witnessed and the encounters committed to oral histories and subsequently to a literate person, usually a churchman who secretly kept records on heretical topics. One of Meyer's most incisive observations is that, in all cases, the visions were regarded as indigenous.